

What If We Had Not Beleived?

In the late 1800s a family from England was camping in the Scottish Highlands. They pitched their tent near the foot of a waterfall that ran into rapids and then through a lower gorge.

When the parents were not looking, their young son fell into those rapids and was swept away downstream. They thought they had lost him. What they didn't realize was that camping downstream from them was a Scottish family of shepherds whose son, younger than the one who had first fallen into the rapids, jumped into the river to save the life of the English boy.

A little later, as the two families gathered around their two soaking wet sons, the English family was filled with gratitude for what this Scottish shepherd boy had done. The English family was well to do so the father offered a very generous cash reward to the boy for saving his son's life. But the Scottish boy's parents would not allow him to accept the gift.

The English father asked where the Scottish boy went to school. His dad responded that in that remote part of Scotland it was rare for any shepherd's children to attend school anywhere at all. It was then that the English father offered to take the shepherd boy back with him and their family to Oxfordshire and pay all of the expenses for his education.

At first it must have been a difficult struggle, but the boy turned into an excellent student. He went on to the university and graduated with high honors and then went on to medical school. From medical school he went on to become a researcher at St. Mary's Hospital in London. It was there in his laboratory at St. Mary's Hospital in 1929 that Dr. Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin. And in 1945 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine.

And the other boy, the one who might have drowned? In 1953 he also won a Nobel Prize, his in literature. His name was Winston Churchill.

What if Churchill had not been saved? Was he not the pivotal leader who enabled Britain to

stand alone against Hitler's rapid conquest of Europe? If he had drowned in the waters of the Scottish Highland might Hitler's dream for the Third Reich have lasted for a thousand years?

What if Alexander Fleming had said "no" to the generous offer that was given to him? Would his genius have stayed among the sheep of Scotland? Would modern medicine have waited years to conquer bacteria and infection? And would millions of lives have been lost?

Enormous differences can be made by simple, single decisions. An old saying claims that "decision determines direction and direction determines destiny." In other words, simple decisions can change a life forever.

There is no more important or determinative decision than the one that a person makes about Jesus Christ. For how we decide about that Christmas child who became the Savior of the world determines not only this life but all eternity as well.

One day Jesus said to his friend Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

Martha answered, "Yes, Lord. I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

Martha made her decision. She believed. So do I. Do you?

But what if she didn't? What if I didn't? What if you didn't? How would we be different if we had not believed?

For one thing, if we had not believed, we would be the way we were. We would be the way we used to be before we became Christians. The Bible says in II Corinthians 5:17 that "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone and the new has come." Obviously, if a person never believed then the new would not come and the old would stay. And we would be the way we were.

When we believed in Jesus Christ we were changed. So no matter what we once were we have been washed clean from every sin and made new in God's goodness.

The Bible gets very specific in I Corinthians 6:9-11 where it describes what some people were like before they became Christians. It says:

Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were

And that's just a partial list. No doubt there are some of us who could say for every category listed "that's what I used to be before I became a Christian." And there are plenty of us who could add to the list because the fact is that we were all very different before Jesus Christ changed our lives.

When we believed in Jesus Christ we were changed. So no matter what we once were we have been washed clean from every sin and made new in God's goodness. But if we didn't believe we would be exactly the way once we were.

Then there are those of us who never really fell into deep sin that wrecked our lives or the lives of others. I've often heard people say that they grew up in a Christian home. They can't remember a time when they did not know about God or the name of Jesus Christ. They made a personal decision to become a Christian at a very young age. They never killed anyone. They were never sexually promiscuous. They never swindled anyone. In some ways, to them it feels like Jesus Christ has never really changed their lives.

Have you ever wondered what you would have been like if you had never believed in Jesus Christ? You see, God protects Christians from sin and disaster. So just for a moment, imagine that the shield of protection that God puts around every person who is a believer in Jesus Christ had never been there. What do you think your life would have been like if sin had never been restrained? Again, the Bible has a description, this time in Romans 1:28-32:

Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, de-

ceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but they approve of those who practice them.

In other words, if we had not believed, we would be sinful disasters going deeper and deeper into sin and its consequences. And we would approve of our sin.

When people won't believe God, what eventually happens is that God says, "If that's the way you want it, I'll just let you float off into sin." It's like an astronaut being separated from his space ship and floating off into space. What a frightening thing that would be!

If we had not believed in Jesus Christ, we would not be the way we are. St. Paul put it this way in I Corinthians 15:10 when he said, ". . . by the grace of God I am what I am." Now that's not to suggest that he was proud or arrogant. There is no place for that in the life of a Christian. The good in our lives isn't because we are any better than anyone else. It is because God gave us the good that we have.

What's really good about you? Are you kind? Are you successful? Are you a loving person? Do you have a strong marriage? Perhaps you are an effective parent, a gifted artist or a wise counselor. As Christians we realize that the "good stuff" in our lives is there because God put it there. We are who we are because of God. And, if we did not believe, we would not be what we are.

Let me put it personally. I'll admit that there are things about me that I just don't like. And I know that I have to accept responsibility for my behavior and for the consequences of it. But there are some things about me that I do like. Sometimes I surprise myself. I say and do some really nice things. I love some people that aren't very loveable. I demonstrate wisdom I didn't know I had. I'm taken aback sometimes by the good that I see in my life—not because I put it there, but because God put it there. It's the grace of God that keeps stuffing this kind of good into the life of every person who believes in Jesus Christ.

And it's not just me; it's every Christian. God does that for everyone who believes. And it makes us glad that we believe in Jesus Christ because, if we didn't believe, we would not be what we are.

And that's not all! We would not become what we are going to be.

Have you seen those signs that say BE PATIENT, GOD ISN'T FINISHED WITH ME YET? They are based on a promise of God in the Bible. In Philippians 1:6 the apostle Paul wrote to Christians and said, "being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." That means that God keeps on working on every person who believes in Jesus Christ. He reshapes and retools, he repairs and replaces, he fixes and polishes. Whenever something is wrong, God goes to work making it right. He never stops working until he makes us absolutely perfect.

Imagine what it would be like if we were stuck the way we were forever. Imagine if God never corrected us when we were wrong. Imagine if he never lifted us up when we were down. Imagine if he never worked on us to change the parts of us that we hate. Imagine if this is the way we would be forever. If we had not believed in Jesus Christ, we would not become what we are going to be, which is perfect.

Last of all, if we had not believed we would not be going where we are going. Jesus was very candid about this one. In John 14:1-3 he said:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms: if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

Notice that Jesus is talking about exactly what we've been talking about. Instead of using the word "believe" he uses the word "trust" which means the same thing. He explains that he is getting heaven ready for those who are believers. He's building and decorating the rooms for us. He has an address for every Christian.

Charleen and I have lived in several different

homes in the years we've been married. The first of them was an eight-foot wide mobile home where we lived shortly after we were married while I was finishing up my college degree. While we were living there we had two different addresses. Our home didn't change but they actually moved it from one location to another so we had a different address but the same house.

Later on we bought a house that was considerably bigger than our mobile home, but as our family began to grow, we realized that the house was too small. I think we especially sensed it when our third child was born and there was no place to put him. His bedroom was the hallway outside our bedroom!

The house was crowded in every way. It didn't have a basement. It didn't have storage space. There were days that we talked about getting something bigger, but, frankly, we didn't have the money to make that happen. We didn't believe we would ever have our dream house.

But then things started to come together, and one day we signed a contract for our dream-house-to-be. I remember so many parts of it. I remember going to decide on the colors for the tile and the carpet. Little decisions that would make that

house ours and would be part of that house for as long as it was there, whether it was our home or not. I remember that we would go at the end of the work day after the carpenters

had left and walk through it to see what changes had been made, which walls had been put up and which ones were closed in.

It's funny how certain things stick in your mind. I especially remember being able to choose where the phone jacks would go because up until that point in my life they had always been in the wrong places. I was almost immobilized by the freedom of being able to pick where they would go. There were a lot of phone jacks in that house!

We still lived in our too-small old house. But every day we knew that we were drawing closer to the house that was being prepared for us. Day by day, room by room it was getting ready. Our excitement grew as the time came closer for the

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home that was being prepared for us would be ready.

And that's the way it is with heaven. Jesus Christ is hard at work on this great new place for us to live. Every day brings us closer and closer to that day when we will be there at our new home in heaven. Every room is being finished up. If you think this world and the houses we live in now are good — you will be “blown away” by where we are going to be living!

But what if we never believed in Jesus Christ? Our lot in heaven might remain empty for eternity. If we did not believe, we would not be going where we are going.

I am so glad that Jesus Christ was born at Christmas. I am so happy that I have believed in Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord. Aren't you? Aren't you glad that you really don't need to wonder very long about “what if?” you had never believed?

Recently I heard the very special true story of a woman who believed and became a Christian in the past year. Her life has been greatly transformed by Jesus Christ. A few days ago she had a long distance telephone conversation with her mother who asked her, “What would you like for Christmas this year?” The daughter really wasn't expecting the question but blurted out, “Mom, what I want more than anything else for

Christmas is for you to accept Jesus Christ as your Savior.”

The mother said to her newly-Christian daughter something that surprised her. She said, “I already did that. I already accepted Jesus as my Savior.” And the daughter said, “But Mom, you don't live like you believe in Jesus.”

Do you know what I want more than anything else this Christmas? I want you to accept Jesus Christ as your Savior. But don't wait until Christmas. Tell God today. Tell him that you believe in Jesus Christ. And then live the way you believe.

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